

Title: **FirstNet to give first responders priority access during crisis to cellular networks**

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Cellphones are a critical means of communication in the modern world, but in a crisis they join other infrastructure — electricity, plumbing, highways — that aren't always reliable.

During an emergency situation, cellular communications networks can become overcrowded, jammed up with too many calls and texts and Snapchats as loved ones attempt to reach each other. For first responders, this can become a problem, as cellphones are an important means of reaching key individuals and teammates.

To address that concern, the State of Iowa announced Tuesday morning it would be among the first states in the country to opt into the FirstNet cell network, which gives priority in a crisis to police, fire and other emergency workers.

Iowa's first responders will be provided special SIM cards for their smartphones, allowing them to connect first to a cell network during a crisis and remain connected, according to a news release issued by Gov. Kim Reynolds' office.

The program hasn't yet been used in Council Bluffs, said Fire Chief Justin James.

"It's a great idea," James said. "The biggest advantage will be when police and fire departments need it during a large-scale situation. Communications is always an issue we face."

According to the release, the system will allow first responders

from different agencies, jurisdictions and states to communicate with one another. Rural first responders will also be able to access broadband internet services, as FirstNet brings broadband 4G LTE to residents and public safety users in rural areas, addressing part of Iowa's "digital divide" in those areas, according to the Reynolds administration.

"The network builds on AT&T's existing footprint to expand coverage and capacity," Reynolds said in the release. "AT&T has invested nearly \$150 million in its Iowa network infrastructure over the past three years. By partnering with FirstNet, we will be able to expand coverage for first responders. As a result, this will also help expand coverage for rural Iowans, providing access to a reliable, high speed wireless connection in areas with little or no connectivity today."

The release said the state won't assume risk or pay for the FirstNet network, which will be deployed, operated, maintained and improved by FirstNet and AT&T.

FirstNet is an independent authority within the U.S. Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration, according to the Iowa Communications Network's website. The initiative seeks to create a nationwide public safety communications network, following the recommendation of the 9/11 Commission.